



Etienne Brunet, Ce qui compte - Ecrits choisis, tome II

Laurent Romary

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Etienne Brunet, *Ce qui compte - Ecrits choisis, tome II*, Céline Poudat (Ed.), Paris:Champion, coll. Lettres Numeriques n°11, 2011. ISBN : 2745322257

“Ce qui compte” (‘what counts’), which should also be read as “ceux qui comptent” (‘those who count’), thus referring to statistical lexicographers, is the second volume of a compendium of papers by Etienne Brunet, a Professor at the University of Nice who spent the last third of the twentieth century developing methods and tools in lexicometry.

For those who have never heard of Etienne Brunet, who essentially published in French, he could be depicted as the most prominent scholar of the French school of (computational) textual statistics, following the seminal role played in this respect by Charles Muller (1977; at a time when computers were not so common in the scholarly landscape). With a background in literary studies, he discovered the possible usage of computers for identifying the stylistic characteristics of a text in the course of his doctoral work on Jean Giroudoux and thereafter spent all his academic life exploring further the application of statistical methods to the understanding of lexical phenomena in texts.

Etienne Brunet entered the still to be explored field of textual statistics with a profound love for literary authors and their language. He appreciates each turn of language, knowing what is characteristic of the author; he can trace a phenomenon he observes within a weighted series of words down to the characteristics of a specific novel. You would hardly find a result which is not explained with reference to a general perspective on the author concerned (see his remarkable analyses on Hugo, Zola or Proust). If I had to give a name to the discipline within which he should be situated, “computational literary criticism” would definitely come to my mind.

With his deep understanding of the tenets of literary works, Etienne Brunet has developed incomparable expertise in the design of corpora, regarded as the experimental setting for his statistical exploration. In one of my favourite papers from the book (Brunet, 2004), actually situated in the context of a larger dispute on the authorship of plays attributed to Corneille and Molière, he gives a wonderful description of how he carved out a series of samples so that a colleague of his could carry out a blind experiment on the data. The fascinating analysis he makes of the criteria he chose and the impact of various possible sample combinations demonstrates how clearly he understood the effect of the corpus, his observable, on the results he could expect to observe.

A second essential skill that Etienne Brunet developed over the years was a deep and precise understanding of the behaviour of statistical measures in a text analysis context and their potential usefulness for specific inquiries. Among the statistical tools he learned to master we should probably put to the fore all these having to do with the expression of contrasts within a corpus. One of the major aspects for which I will remember the work of Etienne Brunet is his contribution to the development of an in-depth methodology for contrastive analysis. For many years his favourite method has been the use of standard deviation (“écart réduit”) as a general tool to observe differences within a corpus. Such differences may occur at many levels of analyses. At a macroscopic level, they can indicate the vocabulary characteristic of an author or a genre with respect to an appropriately varied corpus. They can elicit, stylistic variations within an author’s production across various periods of time for instance. This method allows one to analyse a given text in its general organization, looking for specific differences of expression within sub-sequences of the text. Among the most usual applications that Etienne Brunet makes of this analysis of difference is the

observation of lexical development within a corpus subdivided into time-based subsets, as made available in the resources delivered with his software THIEF. It is also a tremendous tool to observe (“sketch”, in Adam Kilgarriff’s terms) words or expressions in context by the precise analysis of variations within a set of concordances, pointing out for example the impact of a morphologic deference on a word (for instance a plural mark) form in the semantic distribution of its co-lexicon.

Not only does Etienne Brunet like to observe the statistical behaviour of words, but he also takes a personal pleasure in observing the methodological effects of these tools on the legibility or reliability of his results. Moreover, he tends to be a purist in his defence of the simplicity of the Normal distribution, as opposed to the Poisson or the hyper-geometric distributions, in cases where the differences actually observed do not require use of more complex models. His arguments are not purely mathematical; they have to do with the characteristics in size and composition of his corpus and the nature of the feature he wants to observe.

It is important to situate this trend in contrastive analysis within the larger scholarly context in the France of his day. Etienne Brunet's work has a particular resonance for the linguistic community working on differential semantics, which, starting with Bernard Pottier (1974) and more recently under the leadership of François Rastier (1987), has advocated a description of linguistic phenomena based on observed contextual variations. Over the years, it is clear that a real community of practice has developed, sharing essentially the same vision of linguistic fundamentals.

In France, Etienne Brunet is also famous for producing software usually accompanied by “textbases” containing lexical data for one author or another. In 1989, he produced the first version of Hyperbase, a Windows based program that is distributed along with an enormous amount of lexical and full text data. The take-up of Hyperbase may have suffered from its proprietary implementation, as well as its absence from the OSS sphere¹. As an illustration of this aspect of Etienne Brunet’s production, I would encourage interested readers to have a look at and play with the online concordances and statistics he compiled concerning Balzac’s “Comédie humaine”². This is the kind of clear and simple presentation of lexicometric results that one would certainly show students wanting to understand the role of statistical methods in literary studies.

Finally, it is impossible to understand the work of Etienne Brunet, without noticing that he has been first and foremost a practitioner, who would systematically implement and experiment rather than develop new ideas on paper. Most of his writings reflect this: they are all essentially based upon graphic and other outputs produced by his own programs. Fully aware of this, he takes pride in his fondness for numbers at a period where most linguists regarded statistical methods with disdain:

« Aux amateurs de grands espaces et de grands nombres s’ouvre l’aventure concrète et solitaire bien loin des théoriciens qui se bousculent en piétinant la même surface pelée comme les minimes devant la cage de but »

Those who love wide open spaces and large numbers are confronted by a well-defined and lonely adventure, far from the theoreticians scrabbling about in the same well-worn ground in front of the goal posts.

This citation provides me with an opportunity to comment on Brunet's style, which in itself can be an obstacle to a full understanding of his contributions. It is almost as if, being constantly in contact with literary work, he needs to show that he too has a

¹ The software can be bought online from <http://www.unice.fr/bcl/spip.php?rubrique38>

² See <http://ancilla.unice.fr/~brunet/BALZAC/balzac.htm>

literary style of his own. His early work in particular is stylistically very creative³; if an article begins with a metaphor it will be drawn out as long as possible within the piece. At times, this can be really annoying (particularly for the non-native speaker) leading to impatience as the reader waits for the actual results of an analysis to appear. This is all the more unfortunate in that, when focusing simply on defending a point of view in the context of a scholarly dispute, he can actually write some of the most crystal-clear pages on statistical methodology available (“Où l’on mesure la distance entre les distances”).

Putting all his energy within his software, Etienne Brunet also reflects his time with the absence of interest he shows in the way his data, whether text corpus or lexical results, could actually be made widely accessible by adopting standardized formats and devising a dissemination policy for his datasets independent of the software within which they are embedded. In his defence, he actually lived in a period when the largest database of French electronic texts, Frantext, was a bunker that could only be entered by a THIEF: the name he actually gave to software designed to ingest and manipulate Frantext data. Fortunately, times have changed. It has now become a basic tenet of research in digital humanities to think of the corpus as an object that should be published at an early stage.

Finally, the dated atmosphere that one can feel when reading the book is also reflected in the very existence of the volume itself. Written in French, this is a printed book, which only a few French-speaking university libraries will make available on their shelves. Is that really the best way to disseminate the work of Etienne Brunet to a new generation? Only a handful of these papers⁴ may be tracked down on the web, when for instance by happy accident they are part of the online proceedings of a conference. Would it not have been much more forward-thinking to compile an electronic edition of these papers taking advantage of the secure environment offered by a publication archive⁵. Perhaps translating some of the texts could have been too much of a challenge — especially considering the stylistic specificities of the author — but perhaps this may also be an important lesson for the young generation of French scholars. English is a tool that must be mastered if one is to make a long lasting contribution to the world of scholarship, just as much as statistical methodology.

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³ At times even borderline: « La statistique raffole des grands nombres comme les femmes faciles adorent les grandes fortunes »

Statistics is crazy about large numbers, in the same way that easy women love the well-endowed.

⁴ I would actually encourage those interested in the works of Etienne Brunet to start with these: Brunet 1999, 2004, 2006a&b

⁵ There is such a national service in France with the HAL platform: <http://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/>

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Laurent Romary, Inria & HUB-IDSL

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